

A

LETTER

TO

Mr. JAMES ROGERS,

Assistant Preacher to the Methodist Society in LONDON.

OCCASIONED

By his reading an Address to the SOCIETY, at the
NEW CHAPEL, CITY-ROAD, on SUNDAY,
July 1st,

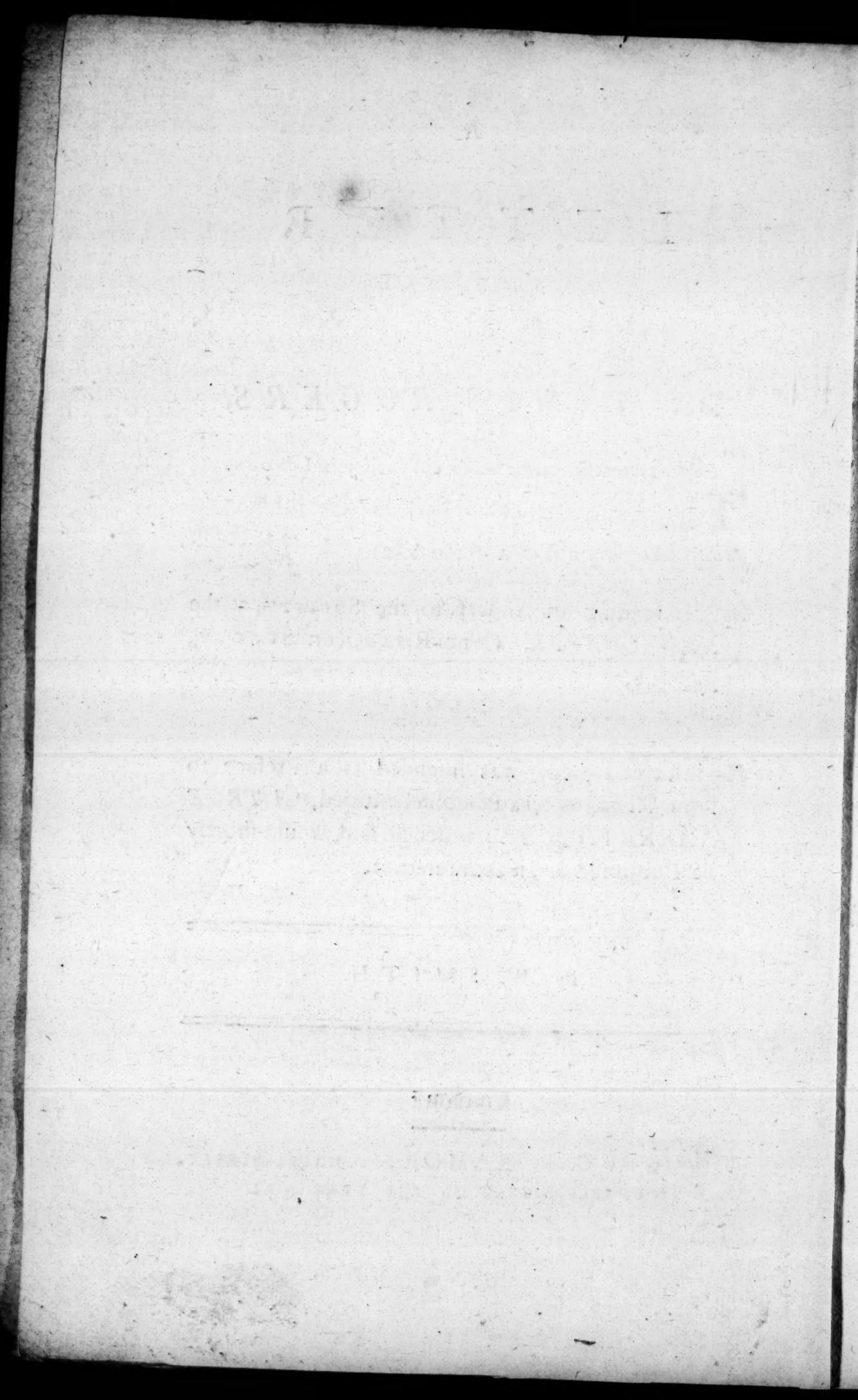
WHICH ADDRESS

He informed them, was intended as a Preface to
some Remarks on a Pamphlet entitled, "*A TRUE
NARRATIVE, &c.*" which he said, would shortly
be Published as an Answer to it.

By W. SMITH.

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P R E F A C E.



THE following Letter was written a few days after the occasion which produced it, took place. It is now published in the state in which it lay, before "Remarks on a True Narrative" made their appearance. As the conduct and motives of Dr. Whitehead's Committee have in the course of those Remarks, been much reflected upon, it appeared to me highly necessary (independent of what Dr. Whitehead may write in defence of the True Narrative) that some individual of the Committee should step forward in behalf of the rest, and obviate the weak and inconclusive grounds, on which the authors of the *Remarks* have attempted to ridicule and censure them. This Letter to Mr. Rogers will explain my sentiments as an individual, and I flatter myself may be useful to those who will favour it with a candid and attentive perusal. I leave it to Dr. Whitehead to vindicate the material facts, which have been controverted in the course of the *Remarks*; though in my opinion little has been said to invalidate them.

I am convinced that the gentlemen who have come forward to countenance Dr. W. in writing the Life of Mr. *Wesley*; have been actuated by the most laudable and honourable motives, and the most liberal and christian principles. It was evident to me that the opposition against him was violent, arbitrary, and illiberal; equally without reason as without authority.

It appeared to me that the terms on which Dr. W. has so strenuously and so properly insisted, are the only terms, circumstanced as he was, on which he could execute the work, in a reputable and independent manner. As he had made an agreement with the Executors, and the Conference had publicly sanctioned his appointment to it, it was presumptuous, and a breach of honour for any party to infringe on his purpose, and interpose in his engagements. The temporal interest of the connection, was no apology for such interference, and was of too low a nature to justify any contention. From the specimens I have seen of the work, I am convinced it would have been a real misfortune to the religious world, had it been suppressed. Its completion and appearance, will I doubt not, obtain Dr. W. and his friends the respect and thanks of the Societies in general. It will then be seen that the opposition against him originated in motives unworthy the authors of it; whose credit will only be restored, by acknowledging their error, and in conducting themselves in future with more circumspection and liberality.

W. S.
A LETTER,



A L E T T E R, &c.

To Mr. JAMES ROGERS.

SIR,

BEING present when you met the Society at the New Chapel on Sunday, July 1st, I was much surprized at the tenor and substance of the Address which you then read, and the sentiments which you expressed on the occasion. Fair, soothing, and plausible as it might read to the audience, it appeared to me replete with error and misrepresentation; and your comments on the subject, were equally illiberal and disingenuous; calculated to mislead the judgment, and infuse into uninformed minds, a spirit of resentment and prejudice against some of the most respectable and serious members of the *London Society*. Though it is of no consequence with respect to myself, yet I feel it my duty to vindicate Dr. Whitehead and his friends, against the violent and unjust sense, which you and your party have affixed to their proceedings: and on this occasion I respectfully claim the serious and candid attention of every *independent* and unprejudiced mind.

On grounds the most false and weak that can be conceived, you have attempted to destroy the reputation of our Narrative, and expressly and publicly accused us of a breach of the ninth commandment, the bearing false witness against our neighbour: an offence the most depraved, that can stigmatize the character of man. You have publickly said that we have engaged to swear to facts, to which we could not have been witness, which it was impossible we could know any thing of, and which could be known to none but God himself. But how Sir, do you intend to support this violent charge. Where, I ask, have Dr. W's Committee engaged to swear? Where is it written? Surely not in the advertisement

ment prefixed to the Narrative, which runs thus. "The facts introduced into the following Narrative were stated separately, and signed by the person or persons who were witnesses of them, all men of character and of respectable and independent situations in life, and who are ready to attest on oath, what they have signed, if legally called upon."

Now Sir, no man that possessed common sense, or read with the least attention, could suppose that this advertisement could refer to the Committee at all; but only to the person, or persons who were witnesses of each fact, and had signed that which they could attest on satisfactory evidence. The word person in the singular number proves that it must refer to the witnesses of the facts alone, and not to the Committee. From this gross misinterpretation of the words however, you have given the Society to understand that the Committee have engaged to swear to all the facts. On the same ground, you have attempted to charge us with disingenuity and falsehood, by insinuating that we have stiled ourselves independent men, though it is only the persons who have signed the facts, and will attest them, that are there alluded to, of whom it is very properly said, (I doubt not) that they are "all men of character, and of respectable and independent situations in life." You Sir, seem to be acquainted with but one sense of the word independent, and suppose it can only mean a person whose fortune is sufficiently ample to support him without labour: and perhaps you thought you shewed us in a degrading light, when you said most of us worked six days in a week to support ourselves and families. Some of us however think the word will admit of a different sense. A master may properly be said to be independent when opposed to a servant, who is under the restraints of authority and the influence of a superior. The Livery of London are frequently addressed, "The independent Livery of the City of London," by which is meant, that they are supposed to be impartial, and vote according to their conscience, without fee or reward. An independent man, then, does not merely mean a rich man, but more properly a sincere, impartial, candid, and unprejudiced man, who speaks, thinks, and acts on all occasions according to his sentiments and best judgment, unshackled by fear, and unbiased by interest. I flatter myself, that Dr. Whitehead's Committee consists of such men; in this sense, at least, I may venture

venture to assert I am in some degree an independent character.

The title-page of the Narrative says, that "the whole was drawn up from a statement of facts fully proved before a Committee, consisting of thirty-one gentlemen." All that can be inferred from this is, that the Committee consists of thirty-one, which is true; and there is not, I am persuaded, a material fact introduced into the Narrative, but what was fully proved, to the satisfaction of all who were present at the several meetings, as the business was progressively discussed. You will admit, that a fact may appear to me, supported upon sufficient grounds, to justify my assent to it, without my being required to swear to it myself.

You next represent our pamphlet as the production of a few members of the Committee only, of which the rest knew nothing, and which they do not approve: nay, you have insinuated, that we have got some names, who deny having had any intention of being of the Committee. With respect to your insinuation, that we have obtained names surreptitiously, we deny the charge. There is not the name of a person mentioned, who did not give his signature to be of that Committee: the grand objects of which were to countenance Dr. W. in writing the Life, and endeavour to rescue his reputation from the arbitrary and violent attacks of a bigotted and persecuting party. The Committee had regular notice of every meeting, and if they declined attendance, they may blame their own negligence; no one of them, I think, could be totally ignorant of the designs and proceedings of the Committee, and if they disapproved of the measures in agitation, why did they not attend, and exert their influence in counteracting what they conceived to be improper? Or why did they not withdraw their names, or enter their protest against what they so totally disapproved? Let them come forward, if there are such as disapprove of our proceedings, which I doubt, and if they think proper we will leave out their names in our next edition of the Narrative. Suppose, however, that some had objected to it, though no objection, I believe, was expressed by any individual, yet that does not affect the validity of the work. You ought to know, that what is done by a majority, is properly the act of the whole, and they are responsible for its consequences. According to the original organization of the Committee, seven persons were empowered to act for the whole, and they might pass a law binding on all, even to the ordering two engravings

engravings at forty guineas, or any other measure, which might become an object of the Committee's attention. One hundred and fifty members of the House of Commons as much represent the nation, as if every member was present, and an act passed by the majority of a small number, is equally valid as if all had been present, and it had received the most unanimous sanction of Parliament. The Committee has not, however, dwindled, but been very unanimous and well attended, considering the great distance at which many of them live, much better than could have been expected. At the general meeting of the Committee, in which the Narrative was read, there were 18 members present; and some were absent who, if they had been there, would have given it their cordial assent; nor do we know that any member of the Committee disapproves of it. You took care to mention to the Society, that several persons objected to the Narrative being made public: This information I fancy you had from myself, in a conversation I had with you in the Vestry; but you did not represent it fairly, because if you had, it would not have answered your purpose. I observed, a motion came from Dr. W. to confine the circulation of the Narrative to the Preachers, that the Conference might be properly informed, and to take such measures towards a reconciliation as would be satisfactory, and reputable to Dr. W. I thought this very liberal and candid of Dr. W. whose conduct, indeed, throughout these transactions, has carried with it an openness and liberality, that with me always produced conviction. From motives of delicacy to yourself and Dr. Coke, I preferred this mode, and seconded the motion, but I told you it was negatived by a large majority. I believe I was the only person who supported the motion; they were unanimous for its immediate and general circulation; judging that injuries so publicly given, required a public reparation.

Thus, Sir, I have endeavoured to obviate and expose the weak and futile grounds on which you have attempted to invalidate our *True Narrative*, disparage our characters, and treat us with illiberal abuse—I say you, because your conduct in the Society will excuse my pointing you out personally; and I appeal to your own conscience and reason, as well as to the good sense of the Connection at large, if you have acted an honest or honourable part, in your endeavours to expose us so unjustly, before our serious friends. If this is a specimen of your truth and candour, the Conference and Society

Society may form an accurate judgment of your general conduct throughout these transactions. You could not but be sensible you were putting a false and unnatural construction on the language of the Narrative; and by that means endeavouring to criminate and ridicule our conduct, I am the more surprized that you should have suffered such a construction to be put on the words of the Narrative, as I had sufficiently explained our meaning to you, if it wanted any, in my conversation with you in the Vestry, when I expressly said, that though I could not swear to any of the facts, as I had not attested any, there was not a fact introduced but we had respectable legal evidence to vouch for the truth of it. You had the effrontery at that time, to charge me with telling lies, in giving my assent to the Narrative, and that I must not consider myself a member of that Society : but from this rash and arbitrary judgment of yours, I appeal to the Connection at large. Is my being persuaded of a fact, from what appears to me sufficient evidence, to be ranked with deliberate and intentional falsehood, and a criminal deviation from truth? Who does not see the tyranny and injustice of such a charge and such a menace: and who gave you authority to exclude any from the Society, at your caprice? From malignant and partial motives, you have done so towards many, who are respectable both for their situation and piety. I told you a truth, however, when I said that, as things were circumstanced, I did not think it any privilege to be in a society, especially under such government as this has experienced for these last twelve months past. I have for some time seen, that unless a person avows himself of your party, he is looked upon with an unfavourable and jealous eye; and if the best man in the Society was to see your conduct in an unfavourable light, and make a spirited opposition to it, he would presently be looked upon as a scismatic, an enemy to the work of God, an agent of Satan, and destitute of every christian principle. I have been shocked and disgusted at the artful means that have been used in private and public, to strengthen your own influence, and keep the minds of the people in a slavish and superstitious bondage to your authority. I have heard discourses and language that would fill weak minds with terror, and make them shudder to resist, or think unfavourably of their spiritual directors, and the cause they had to support. Instead of using means to silence disputes, and inculcate a spirit of love and reconciliation, you have converted these divisions into a means of attaching

the people more closely to yourself, and endeavoured, by a constant habit of duplicity and insinuating arts, to impress them with an idea, that every one who opposed or disapproved the conduct of the Preachers, was an enemy to the truth. Is this christianity; does it not rather bear some resemblance to the *antichristian* policy of *Rome*; by which the great whore, as been fattened, and filled the earth with her abominations.

If you have any regard for your reputation, or the good and welfare of the Connection, desist from any farther vindication of what you cannot justly defend. I am sorry to be concerned in any measures which tend to criminate you; but I owe it to the cause of truth, conscience, and liberty. In particular, I am concerned that my name should appear where Dr. Coke's conduct has been the subject of such severe, but I may say deserved animadversion. In this I have given a very painful proof of my impartiality, as I profess a sincere regard for him, and confess myself under many obligations to his labours. I doubt not but he is a good, as he has been long a valuable and useful man in the church of God. But prejudice and bigotry have hurt his mind, and contaminated his spirit; and his zeal and violence hurry him into extremes and excesses, unfavourable to his reputation, and injurious to the cause he is so strenuous to defend. I recommend you both to acknowledge your errors, and ask pardon of God and your brethren, for the mischief your indiscreet zeal has occasioned. The Conference, we hope, will see the affair in a proper light, and adopt such measures as may produce peace, and reconcile contending parties. Should you be so imprudent as to provoke farther discussion, it will, I am sure, have an issue very much to your prejudice; and as you will of course leave *London* after Conference, it will be your wisdom silently to acquiesce in the censures you have deserved, and regulate your future conduct with more propriety and moderation. The Society has been unhappily divided by these disputes, and the peace of their minds disturbed by prejudice and resentment, or influenced by party zeal, which has done them greater injury, than all your preaching has done them good, as a spirit of party violence and religious bigotry has taken place, to the destruction of peace and love, which is the bond of perfectness and of all virtues.

I would now address myself to the people and offer some sentiments, to emancipate their minds from that state of oppression and bondage in which they are in danger of being involved.

involved. I would recommend them to be calm and dispassionate, and impartially and deliberately to weigh every circumstance, and candidly and rationally determine for themselves. It would be a happy circumstance for them, and for the interests of religion, if they could divest themselves of all violent prepossessions, and of a superstitious veneration for men whom they look up to as their spiritual directors, and to whose sentiments and professions they are apt to pay an unlimited deference, and implicit respect. It is true, we ought to love and esteem faithful men; but, from laudable and lawful things, and by tamely yielding our opinion, judgment and will, to the implicit authority and direction of others, we are in danger of becoming dupes to the errors, prejudices, and passions of designing or mistaken men. It is our duty and the province of our reason, to watch with a vigilant eye, the encroachments of spiritual authority. It is easy to distinguish a selfish, lordly and assuming temper, from an humble, affectionate and disinterested one. Though some men may not be capable of abstruse speculations, yet the moral character of public men is commonly within the reach of the feeblest powers, as far at least as it respects the exercise of their public duties. It is to be sure a very serious and painful thing to expose ministers, but if their conduct be not upright and consistent, they ought to lie open to censure and animadversion. St. Paul withheld Peter to the face, because he walked not uprightly and was to be blamed; and even Barnabas was carried away with their dissimulation. We see how liable the best of men are to be seduced by their prejudices and passions, and if the public conduct of public men was not to be subject to scrutiny, they would soon abuse the respect and confidence that might be shewn to their office and character. It has been the error of mankind to ascribe an undue share of religious veneration and sanctity to men whose profession was considered as sacred; and under this shade their conduct has grown to a most enormous height of imposition and wickedness. Mr. Fletcher in one of his familiar Letters, observes of Mr. M— “I believe him sincere, and though obstinate and suspicious, I am persuaded he has a true desire to know the will, and live the life of God.” But what mischief I say may not such tempers occasion, if permitted to proceed with impunity, especially when mixed with zeal, and with so plausible a pretence as the cause of God. Mr. Fletcher some were observes also, that “the best things corrupted, are the worst of corruptions.” Religion has

has been made the mighty engine by which fallen and degenerate teachers have deceived mankind, and made it subservient to their own interest and ambition. The progress of corruption is imperceptible and makes its insidious way under the specious mask of zeal for the cause of truth, and of love for the souls of men. Satan becomes transformed into an angel of light, and he makes use of men of strong passions to pervert the truth: by representing that as a duty, which a little attention might convince them, is opposite to the pure and disinterested nature of the religion of Christ.

All contention and strife about the temporal prosperity, influence and authority of the Church, are the old symptoms of carnal policy, by which it has been corrupted; for Christianity has ever flourished most pure and vigorous, under the shade of the cross. It may be observed of establishments in general, that however pure and judicious they may have been in their original formation and constitution, yet they naturally verge to corruption, and through the vicious temper of mankind, are subverted from their primitive design. The Methodist oeconomy, which I will admit to be a beautiful fabrick, which God himself has raised, is not yet out of danger from the causes by which others have degenerated and fallen. It is assuming a kind of regular systematic establishment, which involves in it a combination of interests, which the preachers will become every day more tenacious of preserving, and more strenuous to defend. The efforts which they seem to be making, to extend their authority and increase their influence in temporal and religious matters, are an evident mark of a decline from their primitive simplicity; and I fear, if the Methodist connection had the advantages of popular ignorance, and the aid of the civil power, it would in time become as tyrannical and violent as *Rome* itself.

These sentiments may be thought by some, to be a severe judging of good men, and an unjust reproach of a good cause. But they will pardon me, I judge no men, however sincere or exemplary, to be infallible, superior to temptation, or above the seducing influence of corruption. Nor do I admit that any institution however excellent, is incapable of perversion. The primitive fathers of the church, from whom the Popes derived their increased power and affluence, were many of them for some time, burning and shining lights, but became imperceptibly seduced by the bewitching influence of worldly charms.

It has ever been found the happiest and safest system of legislation, where the governed possessed a voice and a certain degree of influence over the sovereign powers. It is this that gives our excellent constitution the superiority and advantage over every other form of government in the known world. Being composed of three Estates, of King, Lords, and Commons, it is so balanced, that each is a wise and salutary check upon the other: so that under its proper influence, it secures liberty without licentiousness, and subordination without tyranny. And it is proper that public men, either in a civil or religious capacity, should be under the controul of the public eye; for there are few who have wisdom and integrity to exercise an absolute power with justice and prudence.

Glorious and desirable as the spread of pure and genuine christianity may be for the world, it has afforded but too fair a pretext for indulging the most dangerous passions. The motive and design is, in the first instance, so worthy and commendable, that it would be criminal to offer the slightest check to its success; but such is the unhappy temper of mankind, that the greatest blessings become curses by our abuse of them. The mind is led to contemplate its success in any great or good cause with admiration and pleasure; it dwells with a seemingly laudable ambition on the prospect of its yet wider extent and diffusive influence, till at length its glory and splendour becomes the ultimate wish of the heart, and the first object of its pursuit. Here its advocates are in danger of losing themselves, and the purity of their cause, in a variety of low and interested passions. They are insensibly inflamed with zeal for its popularity and aggrandizement; pride ambition, love of power, covetousness jealousy of innovation; a variety of arts are resorted to, to support its consequence, chicanery and intrigue, succeed christian simplicity, and the spirit of the gospel expires in the degenerate policy of the church.

The advantages and happiness of a mixed government which affords a reciprocal check, are obvious. For the great mass of people, when properly represented, are in no danger of suffering any material inconveniences, since those whom they have intrusted to legislate for them, are equally involved in the laws which they enact. What I have observed in a political sense, I would have accommodated to a religious one, that is, that we suffer no undue usurpation and tyranny over us in religious matters, but preserve ourselves independent and exert
a right

a right to suspend any preacher, who shall evidently take upon him to act inconsistent with his duty and profession. I would therefore seriously call the attention of the Methodist Societies to the wise exercise of this necessary and valuable prerogative. It is nothing but a spirit of enquiry and independence kept up and preserved among the people, that will prevent every description of abuse, check the introduction of arbitrary measures, and form a necessary barrier against a spiritual dominion. For though the preachers may be good men, and as such, will have and deserve the affection and esteem of the people, yet a blind and indiscriminate approbation, may become a snare to good men, and prove a temptation to weak and obstinate ones, and produce considerable mischief in a large Society, as in the case before us. A bigotted and implicit reverence of men in the capacity of public teachers is injurious to truth, and endangers the purity of the cause. It is from the people alone, under God, that the Methodist cause must be indebted for a continuation of its purity. If the people neglect this power, which it is their duty to exert, Methodism will miserably degenerate.

It is an unhappy and absurd thing to suffer our reason and private judgment to be led captive, or to be in bondage to any man, or be the sworn agent of any party: our religious attachments are particularly dangerous, unless tempered with knowledge, and discretion. From this source have sprung all the evils of religious bigotry, superstition and error, which have deluged the world with violence, and proved the destruction of every amicable and social virtue. One principal cause why the mistakes of ministers have been permitted to sleep in silence, has been, leant the reputation of religion should suffer, by exposing the bad conduct of its teachers; and from a fear least a sight of the abuses which it may have sustained, should shake the attachment of its professors. Any attempts, therefore, to reform, resist, or explode the corrupt lives and doctrines of the Preachers of the Gospel, has been superstitiously censured as giving a rash touch to the ark: this, however, I regard as a mere vulgar prejudice, which, though it may be the interest of priests to inculcate, it is the province of enlightened reason to condemn. Truth wants nothing but its own intrinsic merit to support it. It has made its way in its original purity and vigour, against persecution, poverty, and reproach. Its faithful defenders, will most effectually serve its interests by the purity and innocence of their lives. Christianity does not require human policy, and

and intriguing arts to sustain its authority : it is only the selfish, interested, and ambitious designs of men, that require such unworthy means for their support. I admit, however, that a danger may attend our exposing injudiciously the corruptions of christianity. Hobbs, Voltaire, Hume, and Mr. Gibbon, have developed and exposed the deep mysterious systems of church policy with a licentious freedom, which has done essential injury to the interests of religion. But they being its avowed enemies, have aimed at making the world as professed infidels as themselves. Let us however remember, that whatever men are, the word and truth of God is ever the same. The one may deviate and change, the other is permanent and irrevocable. It is a truth which should be more inculcated and understood ; that the rational principles, and pure influence of genuine religion are real and positive. Its excellence and importance are not impeached by the instability of human principles, or the fluctuation of human passions.

In inculcating these sentiments, it is by no means my design to excite a spirit of disaffection against all those who labour in the word and doctrine among us ; nor am I conscious of any bad intention against its best interests. On the contrary, I make no scruple of avowing the highest veneration and respect for primitive Methodism ; and it will ever be my desire, to count those who rule well worthy of all honour ; and it is my wish to esteem them highly in love for their works sake. I sincerely hope that the result of the ensuing Conference will manifest a spirit of moderation and impartiality among the Preachers ; and if there has been any deviation, either individually or collectively, from the simplicity of the gospel, that they will speedily retreat from such dangerous ground. I can by no means think that the prevalency of ordinations among them is favourable to their piety and usefulness ; and it certainly is a deviation from their original economy. However expedient it might be for America or Scotland, it is by no means necessary for this country. Dr. Coke once publicly confessed, that though there were some among them to whom a gown and band would be a thing purely innocent, yet there were many to whom it would prove hurtful. Birmingham and Liverpool are disturbed on this account, as the Preachers there are warm advocates for a separation from the church, and administer the ordinances among them ; to which I believe the people will be found generally averse, unless it should be by a clergy-

man, as it is in London. They who are in the habits of giving so much instruction, may perhaps do well to take a little. I would therefore recommend them to consider, that their reputation, in a religious point of view, is suspended on the purity, disinterestedness, and moderation of their public and private conduct; and if they obstinately manifest an interested, violent, and authoritative temper, it will open the eyes, and excite the disgust of all judicious and serious persons in their congregations; and will occasion such convulsions, as will terminate in forming independent churches, to avoid the evils of an aspiring combination. I would recommend to the notice both of preachers and people, the venerable Mr. Wesley's comment on Col. iv. 17. "And say to Archippus—one of the pastors of that church, *take heed*—it is the duty of the flock to try them that say they are apostles, to reject the false, and warn, as well as to receive the real: ministry—Not a lordship but a service, a laborious and painful work, an obligation to do and suffer all things; to be the least and the servant of all."

I remain your Friend and Servant,

LONDON,
July 15, 1792.

WILLIAM SMITH.

